

Developing a Volunteer Strategy

If your organisation is thinking about involving volunteers for the first time or developing new volunteering projects there are a number of points to consider and stages to go through:

1. Look at the reasons for involving volunteers
2. Consider who needs to be consulted?
3. Develop an understanding about why people volunteer.
4. Developing opportunities to involve volunteers productively.
5. Look at recruitment and selection of volunteers
6. Consider the maintenance of your volunteer-base - support, supervision and recognition.

Working through these stages will help to determine what to put into a volunteering strategy and how it will be implemented.

1. Why involve volunteers?

When thinking about involving volunteers it is important to be clear about why you want to do this. Involving volunteers has resource implications because **volunteers will need to be managed, trained, supervised, provided with equipment, insured and paid out of pocket expenses.** The skills needed to manage volunteers mirror those of a personnel officer - communication, listening, counselling, negotiation, good organisation, administration, report writing, managing meetings and conflict resolution.

Involving volunteers does not always save money, or help you deliver a service more cheaply in the long-run.

Some of the **reasons why organisations involve volunteers** are:

- To provide an **outreach** into the community;
- to allow the opportunity for **community involvement**;
- to provide **additional services** when resources are not otherwise available;
- to give a more **personal touch** in services to clients;
- to build **links to other groups/clients**;
- to assist in **fundraising**;
- to become more **cost effective**;
- to allow a **quick reaction to changing needs** or crisis situations;
- to respond to a **request** for a specific service;
- to provide an **outlet for specific skills**;
- in the **belief** that everyone has a right to make a contribution.

Knowing why you want to involve volunteers is really helpful in:

- **Designing work** for volunteers to do;
- **clarifying the role** of volunteers in the organisation and what they are contributing;
- **generating a better understanding** among paid staff and service users;
- **identifying** where and how to find people who might want to **volunteer**.

Including a statement in volunteer agreements, handbooks and codes of practice on why you involve volunteers **puts a value on volunteer contribution and helps people to feel more involved in the organisation.**

2. Who needs to be consulted?

Consulting people who are in some way involved in the organisation not only ensures that everyone is on board with your plans but it also helps to formulate ideas for the type of work volunteers will do.

a) “Staff” involvement

Knowing the benefits the organisation will get from involving volunteers is helpful in gaining staff support for volunteer programs. In sport and recreation clubs/associations, “Staff” may all be volunteers themselves so co-operation is essential in developing work for everyone to do and supporting them while they are doing it. Achieving co-operation can be helped if all volunteers are involved in the earliest stages of developing a volunteer strategy.

Gauge the attitude of the club/association by considering these questions::

- Has anyone ever supervised volunteers before? Will the organisation be able to *manage* volunteers?
- Has anyone ever worked in an organisation that involved volunteers other than your club/association?
- Why do you volunteer?
- Are there certain jobs that volunteers should not do? Why? If they don't do it, who will and how will it be paid for?
- Should there be an induction program on working with volunteers if you are a paid worker?
- Are there fears for the quality of work?

Issues raised in the answers need to be addressed.

Demonstrate how volunteers can directly benefit the work of the organisation by asking others to help identify work for volunteers to do:

- What jobs in the organisation are most liked?
- What jobs are most disliked?
- What other activities or projects would you like to do but don't have time for?
- What would you like to see done that no-one has the skills for?

Ensure that volunteer work is integrated throughout the organisation, that it is respected and supported by everyone.

b) Client/service-user involvement

If you are a service-user/client-based organisation it is important to seek the views of the people who benefit from the service. Asking service users how the service can be improved can lead to imaginative and more interesting ideas for volunteering. An example of this is if you have clients whose first language is not English and who would derive additional benefit from having a volunteer with a specific language skill.

c) Consulting with funders

Discussing the development of volunteering with funders will ensure that you are not in danger of infringing funding agreements. It may generate ideas for new projects and additional funding!

d) Consulting with the community

Asking the views of people in the community can also lead to ideas for new volunteering opportunities and may even result in encouraging people to offer themselves as volunteers. This applies whether you serve a geographical area or a community of interest .

3. Volunteer motivation

Understanding what makes people do things without financial reward is crucial when designing work for volunteers. In recent research young people rated volunteering second only to dancing in a list of things they liked doing best in their spare time. This can give useful clues as to the sort of 'job satisfaction' people are looking for from volunteering. Two factors are involved:

- i. personal motives
- ii. organisation of work

Reasons why people volunteer

It is easy to assume that the only reason people want to volunteer is to make the world a better place. This may well be one of the factors, but most people have other more personal reasons and will be looking for opportunities to satisfy these. There are many reasons for volunteering, here are just a few:

- to gain skills and experience
- to gain qualifications/accreditation
- to make new friends
- to work in the community
- to be part of the community
- to join in
- to work with a particular group of people
- to get away from problems
- to meet new people
- to provide a service
- to gain status
- to put existing skills to good use
- to fill time
- to get out of the house
- to improve the community
- to be part of a group
- to meet a challenge
- to change status from service user to contributor
- to have fun
- to give purpose to life
- to be of use
- to get recognition

In developing new voluntary opportunities it is important to have some understanding of personal motivation so that the work can be satisfying and meet personal expectations. For example, if someone volunteers because they want to make friends, they will not be happy if in a one-to-one situation without contact with other volunteers or staff.

Motivating through organisation

Not only does voluntary work need to meet personal expectations of volunteers, but research has shown that there are additional factors in the way work is organised that helps to improve motivation.

Ownership - a sense of personal responsibility over an event, a client, a product, or geographical area. If a volunteer is involved in only one of many activities in a specific service, there can be no sense of ownership. Design jobs that allow volunteers to feel a sense of ownership over them.

Authority to think - give volunteers the opportunity to plan how the work will be done within agreed guidelines. Managers can help set goals but volunteers should be allowed to decide how the goals are achieved.

Responsibility for results - job descriptions usually comprise a list of activities that are to be performed without specifying the end results. Even if the job is fragmented it is possible to set objectives within the work which gives volunteers targets to aim for. Volunteers are far more likely to accomplish the tasks if they have targets.

Self evaluation - this helps volunteers know how they are doing and provides the satisfaction of knowing when they have achieved it. If they don't know how they are doing they are likely to get bored. Involve volunteers in setting measurable targets and provide feedback on their performance. As a volunteer organiser you need to answer the questions "What information will tell us if you are succeeding? How can we collect it?"

Deciding why you want to involve volunteers, and the reasons why people volunteer are the first two steps in devising a volunteer strategy. The next stage is to begin to develop voluntary opportunities that meet the needs of your organisation while at the same time providing work that has the potential to be rewarding and fulfilling.

4. Developing opportunities

The range of work for volunteers is or should be pre-determined by the aims and objectives of the organisation. So while it is important to develop work which is attractive to volunteers, this should be in the context of organisation's ultimate goals. Volunteers are simply one of the mechanisms that organisations use to achieve these goals. The exception to this is where the aims of the organisation are about the personal development of people, where volunteering may be one of a number of different mechanisms to achieve this.

Volunteer work and the way it is presented directly determines the sort of people who will be attracted to it, so if you simply ask for volunteers you are likely to get a response from a limited group of people. When you are developing opportunities you should constantly put yourself on a volunteer's place and ask yourself:

- Why would I want to do this?
- what will I get out of it?
- what experience/skills/training will I need to do it?
- how will I achieve it?
- how will I know when I've achieved it?

If you can answer these in a satisfactory way you are ready to draw up a job description.

Job descriptions

The process of drawing up job descriptions analyses the work in a way that helps build a picture of the sort of people who might do it. It also has the following benefits:

- Helps to define volunteers' role within the organisation;
- gives status to volunteers;
- equalises their position with paid staff;
- clarifies their responsibilities;
- clarifies the limits of their responsibilities.

Job descriptions help to identify how volunteers and their work will be managed. They can be used in recruitment for promoting volunteering and should therefore include a section on what the opportunity offers in the way of rewards and benefits. A job description should include the following:

Title: What the job will be called, or what positions are being offered

Purpose: This is the most important part of the job description because it puts into context and places immediate value on the work you are asking people to do. For example you may want to recruit someone to provide a dog walking service to an elderly person but if you state that the purpose is to help a housebound person stay at home and out of residential care for as long as possible, potential volunteers can instantly appreciate how important the work is.

Suggested activities: Examples of what might be done to accomplish the purpose. The word 'suggested' indicates that volunteers have some authority to think, to pursue other approved activities if the organiser agrees these might be effective in achieving the overall purpose.

Measures: This links back to the need for people to have targets to aim for and to know when they are achieving them. The organisation will have its own ideas of the measures it wants volunteers to achieve, but volunteers themselves should have the opportunity to suggest others. Example measures for a volunteer befriender could be:

To provide a befriending service for up to three clients

To visit each client on a regular appointed visit for a minimum of one hour a week

To raise one new topic of conversation at each visit

To identify two activities/facilities which will improve the client's quality of life

To write up the 'visitor's log after each visit and pass to organiser

To attend at least 3 pre-arranged supervision meetings with organiser

Time scale: Estimates number of hours, and length of commitment. The profile of volunteers is changing and frequently people are looking for short term volunteering to fill gaps in careers or provide experience and skills to move on to something else. Offering opportunities that have no apparent conclusion can be intimidating. Even if the work is ongoing, like the befriending example above, putting a time limit of say six months or a year to a piece of work provides the impetus of working towards a goal and providing the opportunity for evaluation. A time-limited 'contract' allows volunteers to leave without embarrassment on either part. If all is well, the 'contract' can be renewed.

Site: Location of work

Supervision: Relationships with staff and other volunteers, reporting requirements and supervisory relationships, as well as procedures for monitoring and dealing with problems.

Qualities: What skills, attitudes, and knowledge are desired, as well as any requirements such as dress or

Benefits: This should list things that are necessary to carry out the work such as training, insurance, provision of clothing and equipment, and reimbursement of expenses. It should also include any additional rewards your organisation provides such as references, certificates, awards, accreditation, thank-you events.

5. Implementation - the recruitment campaign

One in three people volunteer and many more would do so if they were asked. Successful recruitment depends on having the knowledge of the sort of people most likely to do the particular work on offer and the imagination to devise ways of attracting them to your organisation.

a) Who will do it?

Some people are motivated by the opportunity to use existing skills and experience, and others by the chance to work for a specific cause or with a particular client group. The process of designing the job description will have identified skills, experience and qualities necessary for the work and will indicate the sort of people you are looking for. You may want to formalise this by producing a person specification but be wary of including anything that might contravene equal opportunities, including 'essential' criteria only if it is really necessary for the job. In recruiting volunteers you are not only looking people with specific skills and experience, but also for those with potential to carry out the work with support and training.

b) Where to find them

If the work involves specific skills and experience recruitment will be targeted at places where you will find people with the necessary skills and experience. Widespread and general appeals may raise a lot of interest but will be less efficient than direct targeting. One way to identify where to find potential volunteers is by looking at people doing similar jobs and:

- Establishing whether there is a common factor in their backgrounds – employment, education;
- asking how they became volunteers to see if there are similarities in access routes.

If the work is unskilled, if you want people who can be easily trained, or if you need a lot of people for a one-off event, recruitment can be widespread.

c) How you will attract them

Recruitment has a lot in common with marketing – selling the organisation and its opportunities in a way that makes people want to invest their time in them. The most successful campaigns are those that use a variety of ways to appeal to potential volunteers that match some of the different reasons for volunteering.

Recruitment messages that simply say 'volunteers wanted' are rarely successful because they don't contain sufficient information to raise people's interest. There are four things you should try to convey in your message :

- *Statement of need* – why the job is important, what will happen if it isn't done;
- *what the work involves* – describe it in the context of need in a way that people can picture themselves doing it;
- *benefits to the community* – what the work will accomplish, what changes it will make to people's lives;
- *benefits to volunteers* – what volunteers will get in return – skills, experience, new friends.

Word of mouth recruitment - most people volunteer because someone asks them. Many people are never asked and yet the potential for their involvement is enormous. The best advertisement comes from volunteers themselves who will be more likely to ask friends and family to join them if they find their own volunteering

experience rewarding. Staff, committee members, service users, are all potential ambassadors for the organisation. One problem with word of mouth recruitment is 'cloning' - people recruiting others with similar backgrounds. This can be off-putting to potential volunteers who don't 'match' the profile, so use 'word-of-mouth' in conjunction with other recruiting methods.

Volunteer bureaux - recruiting volunteers is their business so go along and talk to them about different options. If there isn't one in your area, contact the local voluntary council, or spread the word around other voluntary groups who may have volunteers who want to move on.

Publicity - written publicity in the form of posters, leaflets, or adverts and targeted in areas most likely to contain people with the right profile. They should be brief and imaginative to catch people's attention and contain simple messages that appeal directly to people with the kind of motive you are looking for: e.g

- People are hungry, someone should do something about that, be somebody – call ...
- Mr Jones is very lonely, no-one understands him; do you speak Welsh and have a few hours to spare? Phone ...
- Do you like football? So does Benjamin. Why not help him enjoy it! Phone...

Talks and presentations - give talks to schools, colleges, youth centres, contact major employers for presentations to pre-retirement groups, target further education courses, and businesses with people who have the skills you want. Take a volunteer along who can talk about what it's like and answer questions raised by potential volunteers.

Media publicity, community service announcements - only do this if you are geared up to deal with a potential flood of applicants! Most people will benefit from some presentation skills training or better still, try to get someone from the media to do it for you.

Internet – a potentially valuable new source of volunteers as more public access points are being developed. Ask at your local library or local voluntary council for details of how you might use it.

Selecting volunteers

Selection criteria needs to be fair and within equal opportunity guidelines. If you ask for references it is a good idea to provide referees with a copy of the job description and a pro forma reply which asks them to comment on the suitability of the volunteer for this particular work. Many volunteers will not be in job or have a recent employment record and you should help them to identify people who will be able to give them a character reference. If your work is with children or vulnerable adults you will need to have an explicit policy on vetting. This should state clearly the offences or offending behaviour that will prevent people from undertaking certain jobs. It should be attached to the application forms so that volunteers have the opportunity to de-select themselves if necessary. Police checks alone are not a guarantee of safety, nothing will substitute for good management and supervisory practices. If presented with a volunteer who is evidently unsuitable for the work you have, check whether there is other work in the organisation that they could do. If not, you should reject them, telling them why and giving them information on the nearest volunteer bureau which should be able to find them alternative volunteering.

Induction

What you do on the first day determines whether they come back again! Induction helps volunteers become familiar with the people, the surroundings, the job and the organisation. Make them feel welcome - prepare a space – a desk, filing cabinet, draw, coat hook, and provide them with a pack of essentials – pens, paper, name badges, pigeon holes. Prepare an induction timetable and a plan that includes an introduction to other volunteers and staff in the organisation, a list of committee members, latest annual report, essential policies and job information. This should be done as soon as possible after selection and can fill a useful gap while waiting for references. Formal induction should include a session on training needs and work planning.

6. Maintenance - keeping volunteers interested

Whatever systems you have for supporting and supervising volunteers, you will need to know that the work they are doing continues to meet the organisation's needs and satisfies their personal reasons for volunteering. People become bored and annual appraisals are a way of identifying where there is a need to change volunteer's role, either for personal development or organisational reasons. Recognition and appreciation of volunteers should be built into a volunteer strategy – whether it is provided formally through training, accreditation, and award schemes, or informally through 'thank you' events such as parties, birthday cards, mentions in newsletters and annual reports. Organisations should continually try to find ways to reinforce the message that volunteers are a valuable and important asset.

Evaluation

The final stage of the strategy is to have a mechanism for checking whether the volunteer programme is working. Set aside time each year for an annual review, linking back to the reasons why you involve volunteers to get an overall assessment of whether it is fulfilling your objectives.

Counselling out

Volunteers will want at some point to leave and they should be allowed to do this without being made to feel guilty, or forced to stay through a sense of obligation. Time limited contracts make the process of leaving easier. If during supervision or appraisal you reach an agreement that the volunteer should leave, help them to do this easily by providing them with a reference and if appropriate, suggest alternatives.